

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY

The Numbers They Could Cut

Lena Horne and Twenty Years of Being Edited Out of the South

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Who She Is

Lena Mary Calhoun Horne was born June 30, 1917, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, into a family whose grandmother Cora Calhoun Horne was a prominent NAACP activist. Horne joined the chorus line of Harlem's Cotton Club at sixteen in 1933 — a club that, notoriously, showcased Black performers to a whites-only audience — and by 1942 had signed a long-term contract with MGM, one of the first Black performers to do so.

Filmed to Be Cut

MGM's arrangement with Horne became a case study in the mechanics of Hollywood segregation: her musical numbers were shot as self-contained sequences specifically so theaters in the segregated South could excise them from the print entirely without disrupting the plot for white Southern audiences. It was an industry practice built around her presence rather than her talent — a studio investing in a star it was simultaneously engineering to be erasable.

Refusing the Terms

Horne refused those terms wherever she could. During World War II she toured for the USO to entertain Black troops and the Tuskegee Airmen, and left the organization in 1945 rather than continue performing for segregated audiences, financing her own tours of military camps afterward. In the 1950s she was blacklisted during the McCarthy era over reported 1940s associations with left-wing groups — the exact organizations and documentation remain unconfirmed in this research pass. She performed at the March on Washington in August 1963 on behalf of the NAACP, SNCC, and the National Council of Negro Women, and was reportedly present in Jackson, Mississippi, at an NAACP rally with Medgar Evers shortly before his June 1963 assassination.

"tired of being typecast as a Negro who stands against a pillar singing a song. I did that 20 times too often." — Lena Horne, *Variety*, 1968

In 1981, at sixty-three, Horne opened *Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music* on Broadway — it ran 333 performances, at the time the longest-running one-woman show in Broadway history, and won her a Special Tony Award. She received the NAACP Spingarn Medal in 1983 and the Kennedy Center Honors in 1984. She died May 9, 2010, in Manhattan, at ninety-two.

NC Local Lens

No documented connection between Lena Horne and North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County was found in this research pass. Her one confirmed Southern childhood tie was Fort Valley, Georgia, not North Carolina, and her documented wartime performances for the Tuskegee Airmen and other military camps are not tied to any specific North Carolina base in the sources checked. This entry claims no NC connection while noting that NCpedia, DigitalNC, and Fort Bragg's own historical USO records could not be searched in this pass — the gap should be treated as open.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Blacklist specifics: the organizations and documents behind her 1950s blacklisting were not confirmed against a primary HUAC or FBI record in this pass — she does not appear to be listed in the Red Channels pamphlet itself, which conflicts with some popular retellings.

"First" long-term studio contract framing: commonly stated as one of the first such contracts for a Black performer; treat as "one of the first," not a sole claim, absent a comparative source.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Lena Horne, with Richard Schickel, *Lena* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).
2. James Gavin, *Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne* (New York: Atria Books, 2009).
3. "Lena Horne," Kennedy Center Honors, 1984, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/>.
4. "Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music," Internet Broadway Database, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.ibdb.com/>.
5. "Lena Horne," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.